The Sun.
BOOKS AND THE BOOK WORLD
SUNDAY, JANUARY 26, 1919.

A LETTER FROM KANSAS.

WE have been honored by the receipt of a letter from the head of the department of English in a Kansas institution, who writes:

"I hope that the mails lost for your college professors of English subscribers their copies of *Books and the Book World* for December 29 and January 5.

"College professors of English do not like to be disturbed—and most of us cannot be, for that matter. Those issues are disquieting, to say the least. I am sure they shocked many teachers of literature, and as I am equally sure you do not edit *Books and the Book World* to shock any one, I hope the mails lost many copies.

"I refer to page 6 in both issues, the editorial pages. The TNT in those pages was not meant for us, perhaps, but it should have been.

"When I read *Book Reporting* (December 29) I dictated three pages of protest, but did not send it on—thanks to my better judgment. The next week after reading page 6 I hunted up the preceding week's issue and reread *Book Reporting*.

"Then I decided, since you had added so much to my perturbation, to ask you to help me.

An Appeal for Help.

"We need it out here—literary help only, of course. This is the only State college on what was once known as the 'Great Plains.' W. F. Cody won his sobriquet on Government land which is now our campus. Our students are the sons and daughters of pioneers who won over grasshoppers, droughts, hot winds and one crop farms. They are so near to real life that the teaching of literature must be as real as the literature—rather, it ought to be. That's where I want you to help me.

"I am not teaching literature here now as I was taught geology back in Missouri. That's as near as I shall tell you how I teach—it is bad enough and you might not help me if I did. (Perhaps, in fairness to you, I should say that for several years never less than one-third of those to whom we gave degrees have majored in English, and always as many as the next two departments combined.)

"Here's what I am tired of and want to get away from:

"1. Testing students on reading a book by asking fact questions about what is in the book—memory work, you see.

"2. Demanding of students a scholarship in the study of literature that is so academic that it is Prussian.

"3. Demanding that students serve time in literature classes as a means of measuring their advance in the study of literature.

"Here's what I want you to help me with in some definite concrete way: (Sounds like a college professor making an assignment—beg pardon.)

"1. Could you suggest a scheme of 'book reporting' for college students in literature classes? (An old book to a new person is news, isn't it?)

"2. Give me a list of books published during the last ten years that should be included in college English laboratory classes in literature. I want your list. I have my own, but fear it is too academic.

"3. What are some of the things which should enter into the training of teachers of high school English? Part of our work, especially in the summer, is to give such training to men and women who will teach composition and literature in Kansas high schools.

"Your help will not only be appreciated, but it will be used."

Things to Get Away From.

To answer adequately these requests would take about six months work and the answers would make a slender book. And then they would exhibit the defects inseparable from a one man response. None of which excuses a failure to attempt to answer, though it must extenuate failures in the attempt.

We shall try to answer, in this place, though necessarily not all at one time. If nothing better than a few suggestions is the result, why—suggestions may be all that is really needed.

And first respecting the things our friend is tired of and wants to get away from:

1. Fact questions about what is in the book—memory work—are not much use if they stop with the outline of the story. What is *not* in the book may be more important than what is. Why did the author select this scene for narration and omit that other, intrinsically (it seems) the more dramatically interesting of the two? See *The Flirt*, by BOOTH TARKINGTON, where a double murder gets only a few lines and a small boy's doings get whole chapters.

2. Scholarship is less important than wide reading, though the two aren't mutually exclusive. A wide acquaintance doesn't preclude a few profoundly intimate friendships. Textual study has spoiled CHAUCER, SHAKESPEARE and MILTON for most of us. Fifty years hence KIPLING and MASEFIELD will be spoiled in the same way.

3. Time serving over literature is a waste of time. There are only three ways to teach literature. The first is by directing students to books for *voluntary* reading—hundreds of books, thousands. The second is by class lectures—entertaining, idea'd, anecdoted, catholic in range and expository in character. The third is by conversation—argumentative at times, analytic at moments, but mostly by way of exchanging information and opinions.

Study books as you study people. Mix among them. You don't take notes on people unless, perchance, in a diary. Keep a diary on books you read, if you like, but don't "take notes." Look for those qualities in books that you look for in people and make your acquaintances by the same (perhaps unformulated) rules. To read snobbishly is as bad as to practise snobbery among your fellows.

How to Report Books.

We go on to the first of our friend's requests for help. It is a scheme for "book reporting" for college students in literature classes and he premises that an old book to a new reader is news. Of course it is.

Let the student take up a book that's new to him and read it by himself, afterward writing a report of it to be read to the class. When he comes to write his report he must keep in the forefront of his mind this one thing:

To tell the others accurately enough about that book so that each one of them will know whether or not *he* wants to read it.

That is all the book reporter ever tries for. No book is intended for everybody, but almost every book is intended for somebody. The problem of the book reporter is to find the reader.

Comparison may help. For instance, those who enjoy MILTON's pastoral poetry will probably enjoy the long poem in ROBERT NICHOLS's *Ardours and Endurances*. Those who like THACKERAY will like MARY S. WATTS. Those who like ANNA KATHARINE GREEN will thank you for sending them to *The Moonstone*, by one WILKIE COLLINS.

Most stories depend upon suspense in the action for their main effect. You must not "give away" the story so as to spoil it for the reader. In a mystery story you may state the mystery and appraise the solution or even characterize it—but you mustn't reveal it.

Tell 'em that Mr. HERGESHEIMER's *Java Head* is an atmospheric marvel, but will disappoint many readers who put action first. Tell 'em that WILLIAM ALLEN WHITE writes (often) banally, but so saturates his novel with his own big heartedness that he makes you laugh and cry. Tell 'em the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth as well as you can make it out—and for heaven's sake ask yourself with every assertion: "Is this a fact or is it my personal opinion?" *And a fact, for your purpose, will be an opinion in which a large majority of readers will concur.*

We shall answer the other questions a little later.

MEREDITH TWICE OBSCURED.

BOOKS about books often make most delightful reading for all book lovers. But to achieve this end the writer must have something to say combined with charm of style and a total absence of pedantry. Since none of these prerequisites are possessed by J. H. E. CRESS, his volume entitled *George Meredith: A Study of His Works and Personality* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co. $2.) resolves itself into a deadly bore couched in a most affected style of thought and expression.

Even the most ardent admirer of the author of *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* will find it impossible to swallow such highfalutin as this: "With MEREDITH we climb to the Andes of the intellect, and the vastness of the prospect, the radiance of the sun illumining so many different intellectual kingdoms, atones for the touch of frost in the air. But the thin ather is a trial for weak hearts and lungs. Not all can scale these heights, still fewer can abide on those lone tablelands of intellect. Yet the hardened mountaineer will win full many a thrill of sudden discovery such as he can never gain in softer climes."

Let us come back to earth, then, where the going is not so difficult. What Mr. CRESS has done is to illustrate what he considers MEREDITH'S varying moods and periods under such heads as *The Comic Spirit—The Sentimentalist, Youth, Meredith the Artist*, by selecting from among his tales the ones he thinks fit these several headings, and retelling them in outline. With the addition of unoriginal "literary" comments such as, "Obviously, then, one dichotomy of the novel might be the technique of narrative and philosophy."

There are plenty of unregenerate souls who find it difficult enough to read MEREDITH in the original. To read him through Mr. CRESS's translation is a forbidding and joyless task.

The Librarian's Corner

CONDUCTED BY

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LIBRARIES AFTER RUM GOES

IT is a far cry from the conception of a library as a resort for scholars, mainly clergymen, to the modern idea of the *public* library, in the reading rooms of which one may see at any time a preponderance of persons who can hardly be classed as scholars and who are obviously not clergymen. The transition from the cloistered seclusion of the Bodleian to such democracy as is manifest at Fifth avenue and Forty-second street, has not, however, been achieved at a single bound, nor has the evolutionary process as yet reached its final stage.

There are still librarians who prefer to think of their institutions as repositories of learning for the convenience of the already cultured, rather than as centres of recreation for those who do do not affect horn spectacles and the Harvard accent. Offsetting these, however, is the growing host of librarians who, having seen the public library emerge unsheathed after passing the first degrees of socialization, are looking forward with interest not untinged with curiosity to its even more complete democratization.

Libraries and the Saloon.

The suggestion of the library as a substitute for the saloon is of more than academic interest, with the imminence of Prohibition. The practical working out of the idea doubtless involves some difficulties, but if we accept the theory so manfully advocated by the late Bishop Potter of the saloon as the poor man's club, may we not raise the question whether society has a right to deprive any class of citizens of its social privileges without offering something equally good in exchange? The library may never be a perfect substitute for the club, but it may more nearly approximate the saloon, considering the latter in its purely clublike aspect. The rigid enforcement of Prohibition of course will deprive the club of one of its chief advantages over the saloon; a man may get as drunk as he pleases in his club, but no respectable saloonkeeper invites or encourages the patronage of intoxicated persons.

By removing the possibility of this social distinction Prohibition may fairly be considered as striking a body blow at privilege. The clubman still retains the advantage, however, of being able to play poker without police interference; here again the library compares with the saloon rather than with the club.

Smoke While You Read?

It would require but slight extension of the facilities offered by the up to date library, indeed, to make it at least as attractive to the socially inclined as the non-alcholic saloon is ever likely to become. No argument but that of precedent can be adduced against the installation of soda fountains in public libraries, for instance. The smoking room is already making insidious encroachments upon the precincts once devoted to the tenets of the Pure Air League, though not without manful opposition from librarians, who would rather their books should go unread than their pages be polluted by the vile aroma of the filthy weed.

Nor are those who maintain, like one eminent librarian whom I recently heard discussing the subject, that the only proper place for a smoking room is outside the city limits, appeased by the suggestion that ornamental brass cuspidors, such as still adorn the Library of Congress, placed at convenient intervals, might at least make their libraries more attractive to such tobacco users as can find contentment in the now unfashionable pastime of chewing. One of the ways in which the American Library Association displayed its wisdom in the operation of its camp libraries during the war was in the signs that read "Smoking Permitted" shown in the reading rooms.

A New Name for a Library.

Seriously, it is in the direction of club or community centre development that the public library is making its longest strides. When a committee of librarians was trying to explain to the architects of the New York Branch Library buildings exactly what was wanted and met with the usual mediæval misconception of the purposes of libraries, one of the most eminent architects in the United States suddenly saw the light and exclaimed: "Why, these buildings are not to be libraries at all. They are to be reading clubs!"

Already the library is the only public institution, except the police station, that is open to the public in the evening; it is the only public meeting place where men, women and children are alike and always welcome; it has already become at least a foundation for those neighborhood centres which modern sociologists tell us must be the cornerstones of genuine democracy.